

# Copy Editing – The Lowdown



Whether you're an aspiring publisher or a budding writer, **copy editing** is an important stage of the process. You might want to learn how to **self-edit**, or are simply interested in discovering more about a **copy editor's role**. Either way, here's some information, tips, and practical exercises for editing copy.

## What is copy editing?

Copy editing is the process of reviewing and editing a piece of writing to improve its readability. This ensures the style of writing is **consistent**, that the **text flows organically**, and **grammar, continuity and punctuation** is correct. Copy editors provide suggestions on how to best **convey the message** of the writer. In non-fiction, editing involves fact-checking.

## What is a copy editor?

The **job description** for a copy editor varies. A copy editor for a **small newspaper** (known as a sub editor) may lay out pages and decide which news stories should run. A freelancer for a **fiction author** may check sentence structure and diction. It is a slightly different role to a proofreader, who combs for spelling and grammar errors and aesthetic inconsistencies.

## Copy editing tips - someone else's work

Interested in the job title of copy editor? Here are some basic steps:

**Give the text an initial read.** The first read should be about getting the big picture and free of any editing. Reading the entire work as a whole before providing your own notes will help familiarise you with the text and the writer. What are you curious about?

**Read it again and make a plan.** After you've completed your initial reading, go back and read it again with a few questions in mind: Is the writing conveying the author's intent? Does the piece maintain its voice and style throughout? Are there any factual inconsistencies? Do the ideas flow smoothly from one paragraph to the next? Keep a list of notes you plan to address.

**Go line-by-line.** Once you've analysed the writing and formulated your plan for how you'll edit, start at the beginning again. This time, work your way through each sentence, implementing any line edits or suggestions.

**Do a final read.** Check your own work. It is important that your edit improves the readability of the writing, not complicates it. Although there will likely be a proofreading stage, try to ensure the text is as error-free as possible.

## Self-editing tips

**POV:** You just finished the first draft of your story. You're on top of the world. And then you read about editing and realise that the real work starts now. Embrace the process of editing your story. The revision process is when good stories become great.

Read the first draft again, and ask yourself these questions:

**What would happen if I cut (or moved) this scene?** Each scene should establish something, tell the reader something, or move the narrative forward. If it's not doing that? Think about cutting, moving, or rewriting it.

**Are there plot holes, or logical inconsistencies?** Make sure the finer details match the wider plot and setting (e.g. the weather, country, culture, date, time of day). Maybe you're writing an absurdist story with an unreliable narrator. But if it feels out of place? Address this through revisions.

**Does your character have an arc?** Audiences want engaging plots, but they also want detailed characters who undergo change during the events of a story.

**Am I going too fast? Or too slow?** In first drafts, often there is too much exposition up front and a hurried ending. Space out your story points so that every section is equally compelling and nothing feels shoehorned in.

## Copy Editing Checklist

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Capitalisation
- Word usage and repetition
- Sentence structure
- Paragraph construction
- Consistency issues
- Repetition/verbosity
- Dates and times
- Punctuation
- Dialogue tags
- Usage of numbers or numerals
- POV/tense
- Descriptive inconsistencies (character, location)
- Fact-checking
- Typos



# Copy Editing Exercises

## Exercise #1 – Editing someone else’s work

### Remove the unnecessary words in this business letter:

“Somebody has said that words are a lot like inflated money – the more of them that you use, the less each one of them is worth. Right on. Go through your entire letter just as many times as it takes. Search out and annihilate all unnecessary words, and sentences – even entire paragraphs.”

– Malcolm Forbes, editor-in-chief of Forbes Magazine, in a piece called “How to write a business letter”

### Solution - did you get them all?

“Somebody ~~has~~ said that words are ~~a lot~~ like inflated money – the more ~~of them that~~ you use, the less each one ~~of them~~ is worth. ~~Right on.~~ Go through your entire letter ~~just~~ as many times as it takes. ~~Search out and a~~Annihilate all unnecessary words, ~~and~~ sentences – even ~~entire~~ paragraphs.”

## Exercise #2 – Self-editing

### Six word story

Here’s a very famous example of a six-word story, attributed to Hemingway.

**For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.**

Can you write a compelling story in just six words? Try writing one with more words, and then editing it down until you are at the bare bones of the story. This will help you start to answer the question: *what would happen to my story if I cut this scene?*

Here’s some tips, which apply to the six-word story but also to longer-form pieces:

### Have a basic story structure

- Conflict/teaser of a conflict
- Usually a subject followed by a verb that gives it action
- A feeling of resolution

### Have a narrative arc

- Even with so few words, they must tell a story

### Let the reader fill in the blanks

- What you don’t say is as important as what you do say

### Choose your words carefully

- Use strong words, contractions, punctuation
- Write more than you need, then whittle down – edit, edit and edit some more!

